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Big smile, small self: Awe walks promote prosocial positive emotions in older adults.

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Sturm, V. E., Datta, S., Roy, A. R. K., Sible, I. J., Kosik, E. L., Veziris, C. R., Chow, T. E., Morris, N. A., Neuhaus, J., Kramer, J. H., Miller, B. L., Holley, S. R., & Keltner, D. (2020). Big smile, small self: Awe walks promote prosocial positive emotions in older adults. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000876>

Aging into later life is often accompanied by social disconnection, anxiety, and sadness. Negative emotions are self-focused states with detrimental effects on aging and longevity. Awe—a positive emotion elicited when in the presence of vast things not immediately understood—reduces self-focus, promotes social connection, and fosters prosocial actions by encouraging a “small self.” We investigated the emotional benefits of a novel “awe walk” intervention in healthy older adults. Sixty participants took weekly 15-min outdoor walks for 8 weeks; participants were randomly assigned to an awe walk group, which oriented them to experience awe during their walks, or to a control walk group. Participants took photographs of themselves during each walk and rated their emotional experience. Each day, they reported on their daily emotional experience outside of the walk context. Participants also completed pre- and postintervention measures of anxiety, depression, and life satisfaction. Compared with participants who took control walks, those who took awe walks experienced greater awe during their walks and exhibited an increasingly “small self” in their photographs over time. They reported greater joy and prosocial positive emotions during their walks and displayed increasing smile intensity over the study. Outside of the walk context, participants who took awe walks reported greater increases in daily prosocial positive emotions and greater decreases in daily distress over time. Postintervention anxiety, depression, and life satisfaction did not change from baseline in either group. These results suggest cultivating awe enhances positive emotions that foster social connection and diminishes negative emotions that hasten decline.

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